

## **CLASS STRUGGLE IN CULTURAL FORMATION IN CONTEMPORARY TIMES: A FOCUS ON THE THEORETICAL IMPORTANCE OF ANTONIO GRAMSCI AND THE ORGANIC INTELLECTUALISM OF RUSSELL BRAND**

**ALPESH MAISURIA**

A.Maisuria@uel.ac.uk  
University of East London

**ABSTRACT.** The importance of education for social transformation is not exclusively something that is done in schools and universities. Taking education in its broadest formulation – something that happens all of the time, in this article I posit the argument that educative strategies for class struggle need to be sensitive to cultural formation. I highlight the importance of Italian revolutionary Marxist Antonio Gramsci's attention to culture and organic intellectualism as aspects of mounting and then sustaining class struggle and subsequent social change. I animate these ideas using example of Russell Brand whose work can be exemplified as contemporary organic intellectualism for class struggle. I conclude by suggesting that for critique of the neoliberal status quo to be effective for social transformation, it needs to be accompanied by visions of an alternative world as feasible.

**Keywords:** Marx, Culture, Hegemony, Gramsci, Social Transformation, Alternatives

### **Introduction**

I don't feel irresponsible for telling kids not to vote. I feel like I deserve a Blue Peter<sup>1</sup> badge for not telling them to riot. ... [T]hey should rise up and destroy the system that imprisons them, ignores them, condemns and maligns them.  
(R. Brand, 2014)

Humans are educated with the experience of everyday life. As part of this education is consciousness of social class and the possibility of social transformation. Consciousness, as an inalienable feature of human species-being was a feature of every major work by Marx. Consciousness is defined as

“comprised of thoughts, ideas and concepts” (Allman, 1999, p.33). According to Marx, in capitalism, the prevailing conditions suppressed consciousness of the relationship between the classes, and it was these conditions that made humans unfree and alienated. Nevertheless, humans also had the capacity to become *class conscious* and break free from the conditions that prevent human flourishing (Marx and Engels, 1848).

Taking this cue, class consciousness is needed among the working class to create momentum toward a transformative alternative social reality. Theoretically, being conscious of class relations creates the possibility for class formation and class struggle with the goal of building the impetus for social transformation (Gramsci 1971, p.242; Marx, 1844; Slaughter, 1975; Westergaard and Resler, 1975). Developing the Bolsheviks’ strategy for social transformation, Antonio Gramsci developed Marxism to be sensitive to, and work with, the material reality of the moment (Gramsci *et al*, 1977). He contended that class hegemony is in continuous struggle at the socio-cultural level in developed societies, and social transformational strategies, if they are to be successful, need to grasp the material conditions of the social reality of individuals, their cultural forms and their consciousness as socio-historical materiality. Inspired by this Gramscian revolutionary theoretical framework, this article considers the class struggle through the development of critical cultural education, crucially not only within educational institutions but more generally in society as part of lived reality, for the project of transformative praxis. In this way Gramsci is reclaimed as a Marxist revolutionary, not merely a cultural theorist, and the class struggle is advanced as taking place dialectically in socio-cultural forms, in addition to, and expressions of, the economic and political base.

This article posits the argument that history is never finished and the ideological and material class struggle is continually ongoing, and in the modern age this struggle for consciousness and praxis is conditioned by cultural production more than previously. This position is strongly influenced by the work of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci and I begin this article by providing the historicity that brought him to consider what it would take to successfully struggle for class consciousness and to maintain momentum. This groundwork contextualizes the development of the important theoretical theme of constant education and class struggle with Gramsci’s concept of *culture*. To animate this theoretical framework, the second section two changes from a theoretical abstracted orientation to one that focuses on understanding the role of recent activism that exemplifies the class struggle as being advanced in educative cultural forms. I use Russell Brand - the comedian and Hollywood actor turned socio-political activist as a prominent example of the function and uses of popular culture and organic intellectualism to create the conditions for class consciousness and build for praxis. I particularly highlight Brand as important, as he was brought to the fore with his comments about the impotency of the current parliamentary process in Britain and need for

activism. I argue that he has acted upon a weakening hegemony of the dominant class and created the socio-cultural conditions for an emergent alternative reality to seem feasible – this is what an organic intellectualism looks like in contemporary times.

### ***1. Antonio Gramsci***

It could be argued that Gramsci's most important contribution to the development of Marxism was to emphasize the role of culture and the protracted nature of struggle for revolutionary strategy. This innovation was very much grounded in the material world that Gramsci inhabited and his witnessing of the course of history. He observed the period between 1917-19 during which history played out in complex ways, including Lenin ascending to govern through the collapse of Tsarism in Russia, and the culmination of communist revolutions in defeat, including in his native Italy. In relation to the Bolsheviks winning power in October 1917 that seemingly contradicted the dominant interpretations of Marx as advocating that history would unfold in a sequence of conjunctures that would culminate in communism, Gramsci wrote his earliest treatment of Marx in *The Revolution Against Das Capital* (Germino, 1990, pp.61-62). In this polemic piece, Gramsci fiercely defended Marx as a dialectician and vehemently criticised those, such as Plekhanov, who went against this interpretation of Marxism as dialectical by selectively using passages from Marx's works to show the *inevitability* of the collapse of Tsarism and onset of communism (Marx, 1970 [1875]). As a consequence of this robust defence of Marx and exposing positivistic shibboleths, Gramsci was himself traduced and attacked for his voluntarism because of the emphasis he placed on the capacity of humans to change the course of history (Mayo, 2015).

Gramsci's later writings in the *Prison Notebooks* were less polemic, and more nuanced about the distinction between eastern society and western society and the condition needed for a successful frontal attack to take place (Mayo, 2015). He wrote these as a critical evaluation of Russian Marxism, and especially in the reflexion of his own lived world in what became fascist Italy where he was by then imprisoned. His attempts to understand why events had unfolded in the way that they had, and the mechanisms with which the revolutionary spirit lost traction amongst the proletariat, led him more firmly to the idea that history is uncertain and actually plays out in unpredictable ways, and that this provides a challenge for revolutionary planning. Gramsci wrote in *The Revolution Against Das Capital*:

In Russia, Marx's Capital was more the book of the bourgeoisie than of the proletariat. It stood as the critical demonstration of how events should follow a predetermined course. ... Events have overcome *ideologies*. Events have exploded the critical schema determining how the history of Russia would unfold according to the canons of historical materialism<sup>2</sup> (Gramsci *et al*, 1977, p.34 [my emphasis]).

As part of this quote, Gramsci brings into focus the importance of philosophy of history. He was shedding light on how Leninism was defeated because history was not “predetermined” and “events” had changed the course of history (ibid.). Gramsci was representing the unpredictability of history and the absence of determinate laws governing its progress. In other words, history was being made in the conditions of the time, which were part of a changing cosmos of connections. Gramsci in this quote was unequivocal about his ontological perspective. “Events have overcome ideologies” was Gramsci’s way of saying that the social world was open to unpredictability, hence Gramsci was conscious of being sensitive to and working with an appreciation of the material reality of the moment to create the conditions of class struggle for social change. Crucially, Gramsci, more explicitly than Leninism (Strauss, 2012), focused on strategic action emphasizing building the conditions to seize power, *and* also to retain that dominance, through a struggle to dominate culture and consciousness to advance class struggle. Consciousness was at the heart of Gramsci’s contribution to Marxism, and he developed this as part of his endeavor to build on Lenin’s failed revolution. Boggs writes:

During his more than ten isolated and agonizing years in prison, Gramsci returned again and again to the *problem of consciousness* as part of his project of outlining a new revolutionary theory. Hardly a page of the Prison Notebooks escapes the spirit of this effort (Boggs, 1980, p.61 [my emphasis]).

In relation to class consciousness and class formation, in this section of the article, I now discuss two specific concepts of Gramsci’s extensive works that will provide analytical purchase for the empirical study, these are: *culture* and *hegemony* and take these as being fundamental to thinking about, as the quote above states: the “problem of consciousness” (Boggs, 1980, p.61) – a “problem” because it had seemingly been fatefully ignored by Lenin and the Bolsheviks in their revolutionary strategy, something that Gramsci sought to remedy. I begin with the concept of *culture*.

## **Culture**

Lenin placed an emphasis on the economic base of society determining social phenomena. For Lenin, revolutionary strategy focused on the need for insurrection and force. In analyzing how and why the 1917 Russian Communist revolution had failed to establish itself, Gramsci developed Leninism by emphasizing the mechanism of culture, through which he asserted that class struggle took place, and he did this without losing the crucial dynamics of relations of economic production (Strauss, 2012). Gramsci moved away from the dominant idea, at the time common

amongst Communist revolutionaries before 1919, that culture could be reduced to simply a reflex of the economic base, which he pejoratively called “vulgar” and “economism” (Banfield, 2010, p.129; Bennett et al, 1986, p.192). Instead, Gramsci suggested that culture was a fundamental mechanism to understand material reality and the way that it could be used to manufacture the conditions for creating dominant perceptions of society amongst the masses. Gramsci called this *common sense*<sup>3</sup> (Rees, 1998, p.241).

For Gramsci, the dominant culture, played out as *common sense*, is in constant struggle with alternative ways of thinking and acting. Gramsci was arguing that the lived world was open and dialectical, not predictable, and that history is always open, necessarily having to be made and not prefigured by any single determinant (Banfield, 2010, p.137). Gramsci insisted that an individual’s subjective consciousness and practices are generated and articulated in social and cultural mechanisms in reality and in the specification of the life-world of each individual (Boggs, 1980, p.39). Boggs (1980) elaborates this point about complexity and also social change:

In Gramsci’s conception, the only truly revolutionary theory would be one that went beyond economic determinism to take into account the concrete and rich interplay of diverse forces during ‘conjunctural’ periods of social transformation. Thus instead of conceiving of the superstructure as a simple reflection of the economic base, Gramsci viewed the relationship as constantly changing and reciprocal in its historical complexity; politics ideas, religion, and culture may not be autonomous in any ‘ultimate’ sense, but their casual power in any given transitional period could be overriding (Boggs, 1980, pp.36-37).

Crucially Gramsci’s insight was that reality is emergent in a complex integration of diverse forces, which are more than just economics and politics as casually efficacious, and the connections between these were in constant flux. By advocating the importance of understanding the world *as it is* in lived reality, Gramsci was seemingly critically attending to the tendency of some classical Marxists to reduce the concrete and material to abstract theory and conceptualization. This was part of his critical evaluation having witnessed Leninism’s eventual decline (Strauss, 2012).

Through Leninism, Gramsci came to a theoretical understanding that reality as a totality needs to be understood dialectically, incorporating a multiplicity of mechanisms, including those that have the tendency to challenge the dominant hegemony. Furthermore, the understanding of the sophisticated integrated nature of reality importantly needs to entail more than understanding it in political and economic terms as Lenin did. These are part of a complex and changing coming together of elements in society that makes the course of history unpredictable and reconfigures it at specific conjunctures. Secondly, on this point of unpredictability, Gramsci said that the nature of reality was that political doctrines, such as Bolshevism, were conceived too narrowly and their prefiguring that social change would be a straight forward and linear transition was in reality problematic, he said:

This reasoning is based on the necessary reciprocity between structure and superstructure, a reciprocity which is nothing other than the real dialectical process (Gramsci, Hoare and Nowell-Smith, 1971, p.366).

The deployment of “the real dialectical process” was important here stating two related points that he was making. Firstly, that the dominant hegemony of the ruling class is always in various degrees of struggle. Secondly, for Marxist’s ideas to be efficacious they needed to be more sophisticated than the prevailing focus on the economic structure of social relations, which were based on a simplistic antagonistic relationship that would inevitably lead to a revolutionary conjuncture. It signals that Gramsci conceived of the need for Marxism’s theory of revolution to be appreciative of the complex connections in the totality of existence. He was highlighting that history is always in struggle and people could not be simply handed down cultures and ideas that would be unproblematically imbibed and absorbed. In this theoretical and strategic conception, Gramsci developed Leninist epistemology – that revolution could be a direct product of “political doctrine” to implant abstract communist ideas within the proletariat, irrespective of individual’s conditions of existence (see Lenin, 1902a). Gramsci infused Marxist-Leninism with realist ontology, this is about the revolutionary philosophy assimilating the complexity of the world *as it exists* (Joseph, 2006, pp.49-50). Put another way, here Gramsci was writing in the spirit of Marx’s *German Ideology* (which it must be remembered was not published until after Gramsci’s death) that a body of ideas

had to take into account *both* the material and cultural forms at the level of agential action (Marx, 1969 [1845]). Gramsci was extending this to embrace class struggle as being grounded in the socio-cultural lived world, and manifested and represented in consciousness, which were the emergent conditions of mechanisms. The dialectic between materialism and idealism, which expressed itself as an inseparable unity of consciousness and practice (Allman, 2007, p.33) was referred to by Gramsci as the *philosophy of praxis* (Jones, 2006). Therefore, a Gramscian inspired realist ontology for Marxist science asks questions about the world as it exists, thus to relate to “what is out there to know” (Thomas, 1993, p.34) about empirical reality, the *knowing* of it and how this is generated. This is the basis for the revolutionaries to work with these conditions to generate new conditions for social transformation.

In the *Prison Notebooks* Gramsci used the term *philosophy of praxis* in two ways. First, *philosophy of praxis* was being used as a semantic device to refer to *Marxism* to evade censorship. Second, it was also a significant methodological tool to advance Marxism’s theoretical focus on economy by emphasizing the importance of socio-cultural lived reality. Gramscianism therefore highlights the seriousness of the interplay between theory and materiality, which is dialectally, not mechanically related. Put another way, there is a complex series of connections between abstracted *ideas* about how social change can manifest and *actual* social change, and these connections are in constant flux. Gramsci explicitly wrote that his Marxism was about understanding reality as conceived of in history but not reducible to a predictable outcome:

The *philosophy of praxis* is absolute historicism, the absolute bringing down to earth and worldliness of thought, an absolute humanism of history. It is along this line that one must trace the thread of the new conception of the world” (Gramsci, Hoare and Nowell-Smith, 1971, p.465; Forgacs, 2000, p.429).

*Philosophy of praxis* is also, according to Forgacs (2000, p.429):

... both the theory of contradictions in society and at the same time people’s practical awareness of those contradictions. The philosophy of praxis is the

‘self-consciousness’ of historical ‘necessity’. It involves the formation of a revolutionary collective which can act in accordance with that necessity.

Gramsci not only used *philosophy of praxis* to mean class antagonisms that may have created the structural conditions for social change, but also how these antagonisms are understood and represented by the individuals of the masses affected by these antagonisms, which is the critical consciousness needed to build for a “formation of a revolutionary collective”; in other words, workers fighting for their own class interests through their own *practices*. On these terms, Gramscianism conceived as the *philosophy of praxis*, was a theoretical tool to appreciate the complex connections in the totality of reality; and also it was a reference to manifestation in mass culture, and the possibility of class consciousness and class formation in the lived world (Forgacs, 2000, p.429).

*Philosophy of praxis* for Gramsci was linked to what he termed the *conception of the world*, which is a reference to the way that people understand themselves and the social structure of society, and their articulation of this as part of their consciousness. Gramsci believed that culture had a fundamental role in developing people’s critical consciousness. For Gramsci culture is never settled, and it is changeable and open, but there are tendencies that lead to particular outcomes, and these are lived in socio-cultural reality and need to be understood. Put another way, culture was not a-political, and the whilst it is necessarily true that the ruling class will attempt to create the conditions in which their cultural dominance can be maintained, their successful accomplishment of this is not guaranteed. In positing the way that *conceptions of the world* are cultivated, he also suggested that culture was unstable and open, in which there was the in-built space for critical nuances to the ruling class ideas that negation and counter-tendencies to the status quo could be established (Gramsci *et al*, 1977, p.365). It was on these terms that Gramsci placed an emphasis on the real and lived world, and sought his Marxism to advance an understanding of the socio-cultural mechanisms in which the dominant class maintain their position in the social structure, and also where critical nuances to the dominant status quo represent the possibility of struggle to emerge.

For Gramsci then, class struggle was necessarily articulated with social and cultural mechanisms, which were intertwined with politics and economy, in other words they were dialectically related. Gramsci came to this conception of culture



after the collapse of Leninism, which had interpreted culture as no more than knowing “a little Latin and history” or “wringing a scrap of paper called a degree” (Gramsci *et al*, 1977, p.11). He went on to rearticulate this conception of culture:

Culture is something quite different. It is organisation, discipline of one's inner self, a coming to terms with one's own personality; it is the attainment of higher awareness, with the aid of which one succeeds in one's own historical value, one's own function in life, one's own rights and obligations (Gramsci *et al*, 1977, p.11).

This is a key quote in which Gramsci explicated his definition of culture as more than “a mass of unconnected raw facts which have to be filed in the brain as in the columns of a dictionary” (Gramsci *et al*, 1977, p.11). Culture for Gramsci was connected to the way that individuals conceive their own lived world and also the world around them, and in doing so, develop a reflexive understanding of their own role and function in society. Furthermore, culture was not only about having a consciousness of one's self, it created the conditions for a “higher awareness”, in which Gramsci was referring to a capacity to conceive of reality in critical ways and therefore mentally transgress their own lived experience and imagine a different reality framed by greater idealism.

Gramsci pointed out that it was incumbent on revolutionaries to epistemologically conceptualize the role and function of culture in this way, which allowed for an understanding of the complexities with which people thought about values, rights, obligations, and their own function in life. The point here is that culture is connected to creating the conditions with which consciousness of reality emerges, and thinking about the possibilities for the future.

Boggs (1980, p.63) extends the importance of culture and consciousness, and relates it to generating the possibility for class struggle and social change, suggesting that “[c]onsciousness for Gramsci was not an abstract realm of thought, detached from everyday life” and it “shapes political struggle” in which there is the emergent possibility that people become “self-determining revolutionary subjects”. Boggs is getting at the point that people, specifically the working class, will only organise as a class for their common interest, when they have attained consciousness of their class position in the mode of production.

In reassessing and offering a counter-point to Leninism and providing the epistemological underpinnings for appreciating the failure of revolutions across Europe to maintain their momentum, Gramsci had come to the conclusion that historically the ruling class had maintained their dominance through the development of structures and mechanisms that created the culture that disguised class inequality. Gramsci identified mechanisms that operated at the socio-cultural dimension to gain consent from the individuals of the masses. He specifically noted the role of *prizes* that function to appear as though “meritorious activity is rewarded” (Gramsci, Hoare and Nowell-Smith, 1971, p.247). This means that those who *deserved* merit and reward got it, and it was a way that the ruling class managed evident inequality by attempting to create a prevailing perception of meritocracy in the status quo. The concept in play here is the incentive of reward through hard work (Joseph, 2006, p.53), which functions to establish consent to the status quo by making society appear to be fair, while obscuring inequality. In this way, the dominant class were “concealing the contradictions” and antagonisms between the classes to sustain order (Roberts, 1999, p.27; and Green, 2011, p.3).

The combined and dialectical necessity of struggle *for* and *in* culture was a key theme throughout Gramsci’s work. He stressed that a *war of position* was perpetually taking place, which described the relentless ideological battle played out culturally to continually strengthen power relations. Dominating in this battle was crucial to set the conditions to be created in which class consciousness, class formation and class struggle can emerge (Boggs, 1980, p.52). In other words, *war of position* was a reference to practices of the ideological, philosophical and political interaction individuals and emergent social formations had with the ruling class at the dimension of culture and ideas. The important conceptual point here is that for the revolutionary project to flourish, the cultural mechanisms that create the conditions of existence, and how they are experienced and understood by the masses, need to be appreciated in order to get a firm foothold in the class struggle as part of building a hegemony (Banfield, 2010, p.149).

An important contribution, from Gramsci, was understanding struggle as continuous in historical materialism. To frame this, he introduced the concept of *war of position* as distinct from *war of manoeuvre*, the latter was defined as a type of struggle that was characterised by the revolutionary strategy of full frontal and violent attack, which according to Gramsci, was potentially only successful in the context of where the masses of people are not quiescent with the status quo and repression is suppressed in a dictatorial and totalitarian regime. Gramsci’s

observations of the Russian Tsar's defeat by the Bolsheviks had contributed to his thinking here, and from this emerged his views about the impossibility of a violent overthrow and societal transformation in modern capitalist democracies where the mechanisms of appeasement and concessions "guard against internal disintegration and make revolution a political and psychological impossibility" (Jones, 2006, p.31). Importantly, in these contexts, warfare is located primarily at the level of socio-cultural ideas in the struggle for dominant hegemony.

Gramsci's theory of *hegemony* as integral to the part of struggle in daily reality. This provides an analytical tool for empirical analysis of the cultural formations to create the conditions of class consciousness, and how it might be obscured in particular moments in history.

Gramsci explicated the role and function of hegemony, which was about power and domination at the level of leading ideas and cultures, which was crucial to understand the ebb and flow of class struggle. The deep saturation of the ruling ideas and culture into everyday lived reality was the genesis of the individuals of the masses giving consent and acquiescing to the status quo. But this was not to say that these ideas and culture were fixed in a dominant and subordinate relationship; individuals understand these with the specification of their own life-worlds and therein have the potential capacity to mediate, negotiate and even negate these and this is what makes rebellion, resistance and social change immanent (Gledhill, 1994, p.81). In this way, humans are hegemonic and active beings, with the agential capacity to engage in and with class struggle. History is always in degrees of openness to different ideas to become hegemonic.

Gramsci continued outlining the importance of revolutionaries building cultural in-roads into the dominant hegemony to gain influence and build the momentum that created the conditions for struggle. Doing this educative cultural work for building solidarity is difficult because it is going against the grain of the dominant hegemony, but it was crucial, as could be seen as part of the French revolution, for creating the terrain on which a new conception of the world could gain a foothold before, during and after revolution.

In the next section of this article, moving on from the theoretical foundations developed above, particular themes are elucidated in relation to how dominant hegemony of neoliberalism is established in modern, liberal Western societies; and the role and function of *organic intellectuals* to provide educative leadership to countermand these.

## 2. Struggle and Activism in Contemporary Times

Gramsci was living in a time of great turbulence; where war and nationalism were rife and Tsarism, capitalism, social democracy and fascism were in a complex nexus of ideological struggle. The modern age is different in various ways but the fundamental struggle for class consciousness remains the same.

In modern Western developed countries, such as the USA and Britain, neoliberal capitalism is deeply established in the ideological, political, social and cultural fields that are enmeshed in creating the conditions in which a mass *common sense* is manufactured. The *common sense* that has prevailed, since the fall of the Berlin Wall, oscillates between: i) *there is no alternative* (TINA) to the status quo; ii) or that the alternatives that exist are not feasible because they are less desirable and the status quo is *as good as it gets* iii) or the alternatives that exist are not feasible because they are idealist and utopian, not practically realistic.

This triple message is imprinted everywhere and creates the *appearance* that nothing can be done, which is effectively symbolized in the popular cultural slogan *keep calm and carry on* with suffixes such as *shopping, drinking tea* and so forth. While this slogan may seem benign, it represents a deep mechanism which generates a tendency for the maintenance of dominant class ideology in every auspice of lived reality that is almost inescapable. The point here is that the dominant hegemonic ideology cannot exist without the apparatus that support it in lived reality. For example, neoliberalism cannot be maintained by the ruling class without the supporting organs, which includes schools and popular culture that seek to establish the lived conditions for its *consent*. While Gramsci will not have read Marx and Engel's *German Ideology*, as it was published after his death, the theory that the ruling class's ideas are ubiquitous, thus naturalized (i.e. as part of the very existence of humanity) and socialized (by educative apparatus) in the political, social and cultural plane, is in the spirit of Gramsci's concept of hegemony.

While it is important to understand the relation between hegemony and cultural production, Gramsci also promulgated understanding dominant hegemony as something that *could be* struggled against even in the face of capitalist entrenchment (see the 1921 Turin factory occupations). In line with Marx and Engel's later works after the Communist Manifesto arguing for a dialectical and

nuanced understanding of the course of history not a simple economically reductive one, Gramsci proposed that dominant ideas are translated, negotiated and mediated into socio-cultural conditions of existence. This means that there are always in-built opportunities for the dominant ideas to be critiqued, subverted and ultimately negated in particular spatial and temporal junctures. As argued earlier, *Conceptions of the world* are therefore open, flexible and active not simply receptive and reflecting the intentions of the ruling class.

One of the major differences from Gramsci's era and the modern one is the development of technology. The modern society is full of opportunities to voice opinion, while there is significant censorship and surveillance, the possibility exists for spaces to voice a language of narratives that go against the grain, indeed this is one of the *concession* that Gramsci described as part of creating equilibrium (discussed earlier). One such example of this possibility of resistance is Russell Brands news channel on YouTube, *The Trews*, in which Brand provides a critical commentary on current news items, aiming to expose the ways in which the content and framing manufactures consent from the masses.

Gramsci's first degree was in philology, which is a study of language, and Marx talked about the need for a new "poetry" (Marx, 1852) to critique each epoch. This resonates with what Russell Brand symbolizes. He represents the quintessential organic intellectual, a term Gramsci used to differentiate those who were traditional intellectuals – who observed the world through their words and theories, as opposed to being apprehended in the world with all its complex realities. An organic intellectual is someone whose argumental aesthetics resonates with feelings, experiences of the everyday lived socio-cultural realities of the masses. In this way, Brand's personal-as-political identity for struggle is something of an enigma, and valuable to theorize. He has at his disposal mass popular appeal (in 2015 8.7 million Twitter followers, David Cameron had 955k, The Socialist Workers Party had 2,500) and a personal trajectory that started from working class roots and heroin addiction - experiences that have culminated in his recent activism. On these terms Brand represents something interesting from a Marxist/Gramscian perspective. As a global celebrity who came from a troubled and humble background, he represents the ultimate Hollywood *rags-to-tinsel town* dream. His story effectively shows that capitalism *helps those who help themselves* – the ultimate story of meritocracy. But what is interesting is *why* Brand would turn his back on capitalizing further on the trappings of the good life and devote his time, money and energy on acting against the very system that brought

him financial prosperity. This life history opens-up the valuable possibility to suggests that beyond basic needs and material luxuries, financial reward is: vacuous, superficial, unfulfilling and unsatisfactory. Put simply there is more to life than the money and luxury commodities. More importantly, his life represents the emergence of a revolutionary consciousness that exists in interstices within neoliberalism itself (Marx and Engels, 1848; Mayo, 2015). In the case of Brand, he had taken neoliberalism to its absolute limits, and it was during this *neoliberal journey itself* that he became class conscious. The point is that the lived world in neoliberal times incorporates social transformation within itself. Class consciousness and desires of personal and political change are not separate from the world that is lived. Brand is a representative of the Gramscian idea that “all men [sic] are intellectuals” (1971, p.9). He is somebody who had lived the *common sense* of neoliberalism, and come through this with *good sense*.

Furthermore, in Gramscian terms, Brand is using his mass appeal to raise consciousness and create a narrative of *good sense* manifesting in popular culture. In this way he is providing the type of leadership that organic intellectuals display. This is his description of his *Trews* channel, which had more than 1 million subscribers and has had 85 million hits:

This is my channel where we can together, unravel the matrix of modern media and reveal the gleaming reality beyond connecting us all to each other through pure consciousness. Or it's true news. Trews. Before long we will dismantle traditional media, the machinery of capitalism and duplicitous pseudo democracy and realise humankind's true (trew) potential as spiritual beings that manifest our own physical destiny. Also I do voices. And sing my own theme tune. After The Revolution The Trews will be Fox News.

One thing that is striking about the way that Brand operates is his deployment of comedy in the form of ironic sarcasm simultaneously *with* serious critical analysis. On occasion this is in the formulation of descriptive analysis through caricature and ridicule, and at other times this in the form of explanatory critique where he exposes the mechanisms at play at pivotal moments to manufacture consent to the dominant hegemony. For example, Brand caricatures American shock-jocks and particularly *Fox News* anchors who attempt to cultivate sensationalism, fear and danger through the mechanism of language, ominous tone, pictures and narrative,

which is different to critique using cold and passive conservative and formal academic and serious language. The point is that Brand skillfully uses irreverence to do serious critical work, and this method resonates with the culture and language of the masses, particularly the British youth who deploy irony and sarcasm in every speech talk and action. This colloquial bantering is called *taking the piss*, which engages and connects serious critical work with everyday real people and their lived language and practices. More recently the Scottish comic Frankie Boyle has done this to great effect too.

Gramsci described hegemony as being propped up by the *spontaneous consent* that the masses gave over to dominant institutions and individuals in society, such as traditional news networks. *The Trews* functions as offering critique, and with this Brand could be seen as an example of the working class producing their own organic intellectuals, something that Gramsci advised was crucial for the building of a revolutionary movement.

The media has been an instrumental tool for building the trenches from which class struggle is mobilised. Brand and others have been accused of being demagogues, and Brand's understanding of Marxism seems to be limited – both may be the case - but their *actions* and media strategy represent that of organic intellectuals. Putting aside ad hominem, importantly they are activists in class struggle at a time when the masses of young people can more easily conceive of the coming of a zombie apocalypse than the end of capitalism. In this historical conjuncture, the struggle against the status quo primarily materializes in socio-cultural formations, and class struggle in the form of direct action is difficult to mobilise, particularly in the European context against a dominant hegemony of a capitalist class. It is absolutely crucial to highlight that this *direct* action is *not separate* from *cultural* struggle, they are dialectally related – one is difficult to achieve and maintain without the other when it necessitates. As part of the classed cultural struggle, it is significantly and materially important to have a language of a different kind of consciousness, one that makes a move to transgress There Is No Alternative (TINA) and the common sense fatalism in Western developed countries described at the beginning of this section. Put another way, it is a cultural formation that offers a language of hope and struggle that surfaces with Socialism *Is* an alternative (SIFA), and *it is* feasible and practically realistic – mostly it is necessary for the freedom and flourishing of all.

The emerging problem for the ruling class is that the previously apathetic masses are seemingly more aware of their inaction, and apathy is being channeled

into more class conscious practices – unionisation, protests, rallies and so forth, which is demonstrative of the embryo of a people’s class consciousness emerging as part of hegemonic struggle.

The educative work for class struggle at the level of culture that, for example, Brand and other organic intellectuals do represent a negation of the claims of ‘as good as it gets’ from the bourgeois. This kind of negation of negation – a sidestepping of the mystification of reality and creating a different account of reality, one that accords with class war - represents a crisis moment in terms of what Thomas has described as placing the “very foundations of bourgeois hegemony in doubt” (2009, p.145). This doubt must also be accompanied by effective strategizing that takes seriously questions of class as the basis of cultural forms that create the conditions for consent, the importance of agential action of organic intellectuals, and also the unpredictable but conceivable tendencies of history to materialize.

In conclusion, I have elaborated the importance of class struggle as encompassing cultural formation. The neoliberal ruling class in modern times has been particularly apt at using culture effectively to manufacture consent and negate the possibility of effective and sustained resistance of their hegemony. The point here is that for revolutionary educative strategizing, it is not a choice between a focus on class *or* culture, it is seeing them as dialectally integrated in historical materiality. In this way Gramsci was revolutionary, though often misunderstood as operating merely on the cultural plane (see Thomas, 2009, p.135), and I have argued his theorisation of the importance of attending to the conditions of existence is necessary for mounting and crucially sustaining consciousness and practices of revolutionary class struggle. I have also argued that critique of the status quo has to be accompanied by some vision for the future. If revolutionary consciousness is to hold any traction against the all powerful TINA and neoliberalism-feasibly dominant hegemony, then the prospect of an alternative conception of the world has to be offered. The present conjunctural moment presents itself as the best available moment yet since 1917-1919, and we must learn from that moment with Gramsci.

## NOTES



1. Blue Peter is a long-standing British children's programme. Children and adults were awarded the much-coveted Blue Peter badge for demonstrations of achievement, for example environmental work. The badge has been described as symbolizing a cultural British institution for that era.

2. Marx never deployed the term *historical materialism* in his own writings. He consistently described his theory as the *materialist conception of history*. To be clear, in this article the two terms will be used interchangeably.

3. *Common sense* is italicized to denote the Gramscian inflection with which it is deployed.

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